

## Biodiversity is about life, our life!

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It is clear from many indices that the loss of biodiversity in the world is increasing very fast. For example, in its Red List of Threatened Species, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) documents the extinction risk of 47.677 species. 17.921 species are threatened, including 12% of birds, 21% of mammals, 30% of amphibians, 27% of reef-building corals, and 35% of conifers ... (extinction rates up to 1.000 times faster). This biodiversity loss has grim consequences for humanity. Over 1,1 billion people are directly threatened by the loss of fish stock, etc.

### The (re)connection model

The idea to save biodiversity and protect nature, using the **(re)connection model** is new and innovative, but rather hard to accomplish. The (re)connection model contains four levels:

- (re)connect nature with nature
- (re)connect people with nature
- (re)connect business with biodiversity and
- (re)connect policy with practice

A sustainable bottom up & integral approach isn't that common ... It needs to be discussed before it can be developed. It's all about creating awareness for sustainable goals!

As an NGO, the **Regionaal Landschap Kempen en Maasland** incorporates the model and the sustainable principles as much as possible by the creation of (inter)national projects<sup>2</sup>. (Re)connecting society leads to an renewed awareness and action for biodiversity and beautiful landscapes, and results in increasing economic benefits.

In 1995, the Regionaal Landschap Kempen en Maasland implemented the **cycling-network**, a first step to reconnect the relationship between nature and society. This innovative concept is has been very successful with good results for the society (economic benefit) and nature (increased quality). Since the invention of the cycling-network the concept is copied in and beyond the borders of Belgium. Several European countries are showing interest in this innovative project. With an annual economic benefit of 16.5 million euro, the cycling-network – located in the 12 municipalities of the Regionaal Landschap Kempen en Maasland (1/3 part of the province of Limburg) – it is proved that biodiversity projects are assets for sustainable economic development.

The cycling-network is created as **a project of sustainable regional development**, trying to seek the reconnection of society and biodiversity (figure 1).

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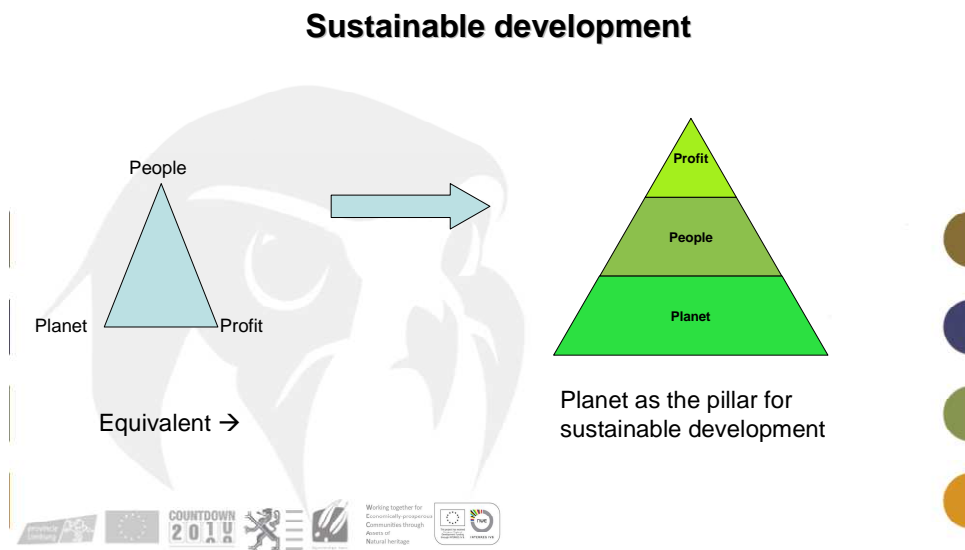


Figure 1 Reconnection of society and biodiversity through sustainable development

A next milestone was achieved with the creation of Belgium's first National Park in March 2006, the **Hoge Kempen National Park**. Since the closing of the coalmines, this region was affected with a lot of unemployment and deprivation at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A large reconversion plan, emphasising only economic growth, was prepared but as a result of lobbying, it could be reshuffled in a way that a part of the money could be used for the development and the creation of the Hoge Kempen National Park. For the first time it was possible to create a budget for biodiversity and sustainability goals from a budget that was intentionally earmarked for only economic projects.

Along with the development of the National Park, the model of (re)connection got its current form. We developed an integral and bottom up approach which was supported by all target groups. We have tried to make nature sexy: thinking out of the box, not focussing on the borders of the national park (figure 2). And in this we have succeeded: the biodiversity is protected and high numbers of visitors are coming over each year. The total amount of investments in the Hoge Kempen National Park (6 municipalities) culminates to more than €120 million, with an annual economic benefit of €20 million. All these investments were possible due to the financial support of partners, organisations, entrepreneurs and governments. The annual economic return is based on a constant electronic calculation of our visitors, combined with questionnaires about their spending behaviour, etc.

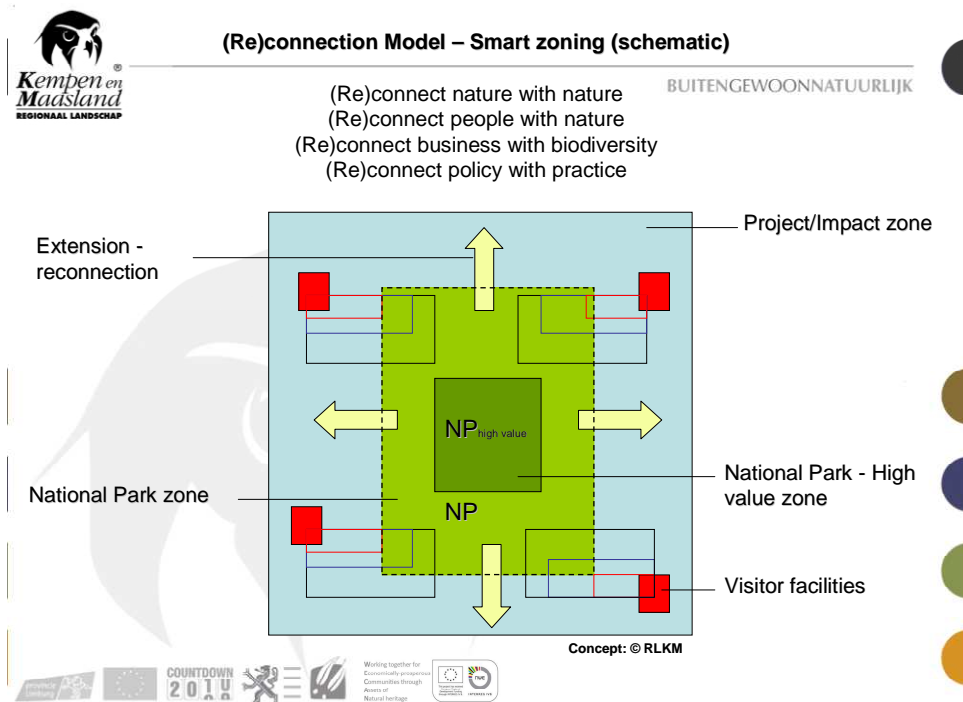


Figure 2. The (re)connection model applied for a National Park

This innovative and renewed way of biodiversity protection – based on a broader perspective and along with all parts of society – got a lot of **international recognition**<sup>1</sup>. This international recognition led to an increased interest of our model and even a meeting with Al Gore in April 2009. Since the development of the Hoge Kempen National Park, global organisations like the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) promotes the (re)connection model globally as the successful model to protect biodiversity. Furthermore, we are implementing our model on a new European Interreg IVB project, WECAN<sup>2</sup> with partners out of France and the UK.

### The work isn't done!

A sustainable society demands a constant concern and investment. Besides the daily work and running projects (...), a lot of opportunities are still appearing locally and in a broader perspective. Currently we are trying to work out new sustainable financing techniques for the protection of biodiversity, based on the experience with the Visitor Payback System. Furthermore, we are working on the development of the main gateway of the Hoge Kempen National Park and trying to receive recognition as UNESCO World Heritage Site, etc.

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<sup>2</sup> Working together for Economically prosperous Communities through Assets of Natural heritage